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SUBJECT: THE KURDISTAN ISLAMIC GROUP IN SULAIMANIYAH, IRAQI KURDISTAN

This is a Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) Cable.

I1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG) members told RRT off that they would like to increase the dialogue on a range of issues between the KIG and USG. They similarly said they wanted to see more USG engagement with moderate Islamic political parties in Kurdistan and more broadly in Iraq. The KIG was associated in the past with the terrorist group Ansar al-Islam but says it now rejects violence and extremism and supports the demilitarization of political parties and the development of effective anti-corruption programs. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

I2. (SBU) On March 29, RRTOff met in Sulaimaniyah with two members of the KIG, Mohmad H. Jabar and Anwar Faraj Saddon. Jabar is also a member of the Provincial Council of Sulaimaniyah Province. Established in May of 2001, the KIG is led by Mamousta Ali Baper, a former member of the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan. (Note: KIG leader Baper was arrested in 2003 by US forces and released in 2005.) The KIG adheres to a Salafi or Sufi tradition. KIG members say they focus on learning and negotiation to promote progress and conflict resolution. The KIG members told RRT Off they support the rights of women, due process, and freedom from torture.

I3. (SBU) In 2005 during the Iraqi legislative elections, KIG joined the coalition that included the two dominant parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KIG obtained six seats in the Kurdistan National Assembly and two seat in the Iraqi Council of Representatives. KIG members estimate they have 90,000 supporters in the three provinces of the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

I4. (SBU) The KIG was previously associated with the terrorist group Ansar al-Islam, but denies that such an association is valid today. Some of the KIG members were killed or injured in the US-led raid against Ansar al-Islam in March 2003 along the Iranian border in Sulaimaniyah Province. The KIG originated in Sulaimaniyah Province where it has received funding from the dominant political party there - the PUK. The KIG interlocutors specified, however, that current legislation governing political parties stipulated that support is from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and not from the PUK. However, since the major parties (PUK and KDP) control the government, the PUK continues to claim it supports the KIG. The KIG also relies on dues from party members to finance its operation.

A MODEL FOR POLITICAL DEMILITARIZATION?

I5. (SBU) KIG members told RRTOff that they condemned the terrorist attacks of September 11. The KIG underscored the need to demilitarize Iraqi political parties and build their country without

weapons. They said this is why KIG party members turned in their weapons to the US in 2003 and were the only Iraqi party to do so.

USG SHOULD "ENGAGEME MORE WITH MODERATE ISLAMIC PARTIES"

¶6. (SBU) KIG members were appreciative of the opportunity to meet with RRTOff and said they would like more and continued access to USG officials to express their views directly. They stated that a single meeting with USG officials with no follow-up would be not sufficient and asked RRTOff for assistance. RRTOff offered to help put them in contact with the USG could put them in contact with National Democratic Institute and International Republic Institute. They offered to arrange a meeting n Erbil between RRTOff and the national president of the KIG.

¶7. (SBU) The KIG members emphasized the legitimate role that moderate Islamic parties in Iraq have in the political process. KIG members expressed the view that the US should distinguish between moderate Islamic parties and terrorist groups. Terrorist groups, they continued, are present in response to problems in Iraqi politics and in reaction to Western attitudes. According to these KIG members, the West should better understand the motives of the terrorists and what they are fighting for. If the US continues to look at all Islamic parties as extremists, they pointed out, this could drive more Islamists to engage in terrorist activities.

SEEKING REFORM IN KURDISH POLITICS

¶8. (SBU) The KIG members asserted that their low representation in
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the Kurdistan National Assembly makes it difficult to fight corruption within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and within the KDP and PUK. KIG members complained that it is difficult to stand up against the PUK and KDP to create democratic processes related to elections, the media and press. Unlike the KIG, the PUK and KDP have financial security and military power, they said. The KRG budget is controlled by the major parties and smaller parties are entitled to only a small portion. The KIG members stated the PUK and KDP use the problem of limited KRG funding as a pressure point to constrict KIG activities in the region.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT. The KIG's message of anti-corruption and democratization may garner additional support for the party over time. However, it will remain an uphill battle to loosen the lock-hold the KDP and PUK continue to have over Kurdish regional politics. The KDP and PUK have included the KIG in their national-level coalition, but thus far have squeezed it out of a more political and economic role either in Baghdad or in Erbil.